

Translation as a Political Act: Conference at the University of Perugia, 9-11 May 2019

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Much attention has been reserved, in Translation Studies, to the notion of agency, the term indicating the attention paid to the ways in which translators intervene as conscious actors in the process of transferring meanings from one linguistic and cultural system to another (Chesterman 2009; Dam and Korning Zethsen 2009; Milton and Bandia 2009). A number of works, for example, have brought to light specific and conscious interventions by translators in the sphere of radical politics (Tymoczko 2007: 189-201 and 2010; Baker 2015). This focus, along with the "turns" in translation studies away from purely textual approaches (Snell-Hornby 2006) mirrored by a growing interest in translation on the part of other disciplines such as cultural studies (Bassnett 1998; Bachman-Medick 2009), makes it unsurprising that a conference entitled *Translation as a Political Act* should have been held in a Political Science department, at the University of Perugia on 9-11 May 2019. The conference, organised by Diana Bianchi, Francesca Piselli and Federico Zanettin in collaboration with the Jan Buts and Henry Jones of the Genealogies of Knowledge Project (University of Manchester), and conducted in three languages, English, French and Italian, enabled around 70 participants from a large number of international institutions to come together to discuss this topic in a wide variety of specific contexts.

A starting point for many contributions was a common perception of what might be termed the linguistic and translational challenges characterising the globalised world of the twenty-first century. This focus on the context of translation in the present was theorised in the opening lecture by Mona Baker, who pointed out that the actions of translators in a contemporary context cannot be cut off either from the past, which the translator consciously revisits, or from the future, which

the translator often prefigures. This opening consideration regarding the active political role of the translator in a diachronic framework was then articulated in a series of other keynotes which focused on the role of translators and translation in contemporary multilingual environments such as the World Social Forum (Nicole Doerr), the “new politics” of the global reactions to the current economic crisis (Fruea Fernandez), and situations of war such as those of the conflicts in the Arab world (Lynne Franjié). One keynote speech usefully relativized this present-focus with an exploration of the cosmopolitan and translingual environment of eighteenth-century Britain and France (Guy Rooryck and Lieve Jooker).

Aspects related to the particular multilingual character of the contemporary world were a focus of a number of papers. A useful preliminary observation was made by Nicholas Froeliger, who reminded all the participants of the questions this raises for translation training, making this training itself a political act. Christina Carrasco, Stefania Taviano and Andrea Ciribuco all focused on translation as an integral part of the experience of migrants who seek, on a daily basis, both to decode the unfamiliar and to impose their own meaning systems on the spaces and institutions they encounter. Audrey Canaless similarly argued that the translation of the humour of American comedians of Indian origins, dealing with issues of identity regarding second generation migrants, has a significant political value. Irena Kristeva looked at *globish* (from “global” and “English”), while other papers took the consolidation of the multicultural and multilingual contexts of the present as their starting point, as did the paper on language and translation in Québec by Salah Basalamah. Canada’s official French-English bilingualism was also discussed by Gillian Lane-Mercier, who pointed out its limits in the exclusion and (non)translation of indigenous literatures. The peculiar forms of “lifestyle politics”, and its move towards the depoliticization and marketization that characterize political discourse today, was the specific focus of a paper by M. Cristina Caimotto and Rachele Raus. In all these areas characterising the present – migration, the hegemony of English, increasing cosmopolitanism and the peculiar characteristics of contemporary political discourse – translation was highlighted as occupying a pivotal position.

The awareness on the part of translators of their political role emerged clearly on a number of occasions. This was particularly evident in the many papers which discussed the relations between translation and political activism, following the lines indicated in Nicole Doerr's keynote speech, Julie Boéri, for example, looked at translation and the communicative practices of a number of social movements, and Houssein Ben Lazreg presented the example of the Free Syrian Translators, many of whose activists adopted translation as an important means of widening the audience for their own political activities. In a very different, but no less activist context, Joseph Keady looked at translation on the part of right-wing white nationalists in Northern American, German and French publishing companies. Awareness of the role of translation was also a focus of papers looking at issues of translation and gender, for example in Jonathan Evans's and Ting Guo's examination of the translation of queer cinema in China in a context of the censorship of LGBTQ+ themes. The consciousness of translators of the highly political nature of their work was also present in Deniz Malaymar's analysis of the work of the Turkish poet, writer and translator Sabahattin Ali as well as the reflections of Valérie Bada and Christine Pagnoulle on their own translation of the work of the Afro-American dramatist August Wilson.

Translation in and for political institutions, which rely on the creation and maintenance of standard meanings, were the focus of a number of papers. The language policy of the European Union, in which all the languages of the member states have equal status, was examined with regard to interpreters (Caterina Falbo) and the Translation Service of the European Parliament (Valter Mavric). Elena Ruiz Cortéz reflected on the "political maze" of European Union law with special reference to the translation into Spanish of the directive on freedom of movement. Francesca Seracini highlighted the fact that despite the EU's commitment to multilingualism, English has gradually established itself as the main language used in the negotiation and drafting of the original texts of European legislation. Carmen Saggiomo, however, underlined the importance of the multilingual experiment in the EU, arguing that although it was originally conceived of as an interlinguistic instrument, it has now become part of a real and perceived right on the part of citizens to have adequate access to the laws that govern them in their own languages. Other institutional settings concerned the United Nations General Assembly, as illustrated by Catarina Fonte's discussion

of the translation of its fundamental Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 into Chinese, and the Catholic Church in Ireland, which was the focus of Anne O'Connor's examination of translation in a period which saw the democratisation of access to religious texts alongside a parallel need to preserve orthodoxy.

A number of papers looked at specific political conflicts and the role of translation in them. Marc Pomerleau focused on the Catalan independence movement and the deliberate choice, on the part of those involved in it, to use translation to target both major interlocutors on a European stage and, by contrast, non-Catalan speakers such as migrants. Hyongrae Kim looked at the American occupation of South Korea in the period 1945-48, in which the American military personnel were forced to rely totally on local "malicious" interpreters. Elena Aguirre Fernández Bravo examined in a more general sense the political implications of interpreting in political and diplomatic contexts. Jan Buts took the example of the 1905 revolution in Russia and the anti-austerity movement of 2011 to show how both relied on translation to construct alternative historical narratives.

Although the overall orientation of the conference involved the presumption of the political implications of translation per se, a number of papers took their starting points directly from overtly political texts and explored the ways in which translations of them have been significant. Indira Sultanic and Adriana Di Biase discussed the challenges of translating Trump's idiosyncratic and largely monosyllabic style, an activity which has become known as "Trumpslation", while Salma Chabbak of the Al Jazeera Media Network reflected upon the ways in which audiovisual translation can manipulate the reception of contemporary political documentaries. Enrico Caniglia looked at interpreting in political talk shows, highlighting the specific linguistic aspects of mediating conflict in discourse. The translation of Beppe Grillo's promotion of a "V-Day" ("Vaffanculo Day" literally "Fuck Off" day) in the Francophone press was examined by Fernando Funari, and the ways in which the names of Italian political parties appear in the French press was the object of Jean-Louis Vaxelaire's paper. Narongdej Phanphoommee looked at the translation of the particularly idiosyncratic style of the Thai Junta, arguing that this style was significantly toned down in the process. A paper by Christina Delistathi interestingly explored the

translation of Marx and Engels's selected works into Greek from the point of view of the collective work process behind the translations. Some literary works with a strong political message were also explored, such as the Turkish novel *Gavur Mahallesi* (1992) by Migirdic Margosyan whose English translation, according to Göksenin Abdal, significantly depoliticised and underplayed the plea for multiethnicity and multilingualism contained in it.

Some papers looked at apparently non-political texts which, through translation, took on political meaning. Examples included the translations of the Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani into German which, Mohammed Lafi, argued constituted a form of "alternative diplomacy", and the apparently innocuous translations of classical legends into film in Tibet which, according to Wai-ping Yau, in fact constituted a means of addressing issues of asymmetrical power relations. Stephen Slessor looked at the lyric opera by Harry Somers on the story of the Canadian rebel Louis Riel whose trilingual surtitles provided an extra political meaning by conferring equal status on Métis indigenous language. On a general and methodological level, Carla Mereu Keating argued that revoicing modes such as dubbing and voice over commonly embody certain relations of power and thus have political implications.

The conference included a number of papers dealing with translation in historical contexts. Some of these were the result of work currently being carried out as part of the Genealogies of Knowledge project of Manchester University, whose intention is to trace the genealogy of concepts through processes of (re)translation. Henry Jones and Kamran Karimullah, for example, dealt respectively with English translations of Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War*, and some of the methodological implications of translating Arabic into English from manuscripts or from printed texts. Other presentations on translations of the classics included Brice Denoyer's analysis of the translation of Sophocles's *Electra* into French by Lazare de Baif (1529), Julien Berguer's exploration of the translations of Dionysius of Halicarnassus, also in sixteenth-century France, and Andrea Catanzaro's paper on Thomas Hobbes's late translations of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The reception of western texts in the Arab world was the object of analysis by Paola Viviani with regard to those of the period of Arab modernisation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Translation in the

cosmopolitan Enlightenment and the revolutionary period were discussed by Alessia Castagnino, who presented the use of translation to disseminate Enlightenment thought in Leopoldine Tuscany; Laura Tarkka-Robinson who looked at two translations into English of a fundamental text for European nationalism, Johann George Zimmerman's *Von dem Nazionalstolze* (1758); Patrick Leech, who examined translations into English of works relating to the French Revolution in a literary review published in London in the 1790s; Regina Lupi and Francesca Piselli who focused on translations into Italian of a French language counterrevolutionary newspaper which also appeared in London in the 1790s; and finally Jane Elisabeth Wilhelm, who discussed the translations of the "Groupe de Coppet" of Mme de Stael and Benjamin Constant. Turning to the twentieth century, Camilla Emmenegger, Francesco Gallino and Daniele Gorgone looked at the different political agendas behind the various translations of Étienne de La Boétie's influential sixteenth-century radical text, *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude*, focusing in particular on the way that translations used La Boétie to attack the tyrannies of Nazism and Fascism. Translation during World War Two was the subject also of Ida Hove Solberg's look at the crucial role of translators in occupied Norway. Translation in the context of oppressive national dictatorships was looked at in three different cases: the Istituto Nazionale per le Relazioni Culturali con l'Estero (IRCE) in Fascist Italy (Lorenzo Medici); the transgressive intentions behind the translations of French surrealists during the final years of the Franco regime (Marian Panchon Hidalgo); and Allen Ginsberg's reliance on translation during his well-known visit to and expulsion from Czechoslovakia in 1965 (Igor Tyss).

The conference was memorable for the variety of geographical contexts which provided the backdrop for the examples discussed. The exploration of the intricacies of the political nature of translation in these different contexts, from Canada to Spain and Italy, from the Middle East to South Korea, provided a real sense that these issues are recognized as pertinent on a global scale. The plurality of approaches, from linguistic analysis to literary and postcolonial studies, political science and history, testified to the wealth of work in this field and the capacities of the organizers to tap into this wealth and provide an overall platform for comparison and discussion. The conference was thus a small but important step in the recognition of the poverty of national or monolingual

approaches to analyses of political power and political action and the many ways in which a multilingual and translational perspective can offer new insights into these analyses.

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